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IDEAL PASSION

IDEAL PASSION

SONNETS

BY

GEORGE EDWARD WOODBERRY



*Behold, I dream a dream of good,
And mingle all the world with thee.*

TENNYSON

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IDEAL PASSION

I

MY lady ne'er hath given herself to me
In mortal ways, nor on my eyes to hold
Her image; in a flying marble fold
Of Hellas once I saw eternity
Flutter about her form; all nature she
Inspirits, but round her being there is rolled
The inextinguishable beauty old
Of the far-shining mountains and the sea.

Now all my manhood doth enrich her shrine,
Where first the young boy stored all hope, all fear.
Fortune and fame and love be never mine,
Since, seeking those, to her I were less dear!
Albeit she hides herself in the divine,
Always and everywhere I feel her near.

SHE is not cold, as mortal maidens are;
 She is as vital as the universe,
 Like those great powers antiquity did nurse
 Upon the breast of being, names that star
 The dusky dawn of passion, when the war
 Of the created rose above the curse,
 And throned for aye the better o'er the worse,—
 Astarte's, Aphrodite's avatar,—

The procreant beauty of love marvellous,
 Sister of Ceres and of Semele,
 The mighty mothers; I have seen her thus,
 Drawing Sicilian children to her knee,
 While cypress and rose-laurel ominous
 Burned in the noon beside the barren sea.

III

SHE is not holy like the Virgin One,
The miracle of nature, simple, mild,
The mother sanctified above the child,
With rapt gaze turned forever on her Son,
In whom the world's salvation was begun;
Deep in His eyes creation undefiled
Rose like a star; whereat my lady smiled,
Before whom heavenly love doth herald run.

Her children are world prophecies to be
Far off ensouled in life mysterious;
Tremendous births, beyond the ecstasy
Of nature's ordination over us;
Immanent in the spiritual sea
Their beauty, and their godhead glorious.

IV

SHE doth not leave me comfortless, nor e'er
 Of other lovers envious do I go,
 Who knew their ladies in the life below
 And after mourned them, whence the frequent stir
 Of what hath been doth sadly minister
 Images of what they no more shall know;
 She, unremembered, is more heavenly so;
 And more imperishably unto her

My thoughts mount up, free from all earthly sense,
 Regrets, and grief-changed joys, if any joy,
 Vain recollections of love's impotence,
 And blots that our vexed life below annoy;
 My thoughts still meet her in pure innocence,
 And manhood but repeats the virgin boy.

I BEAR the lyre, and marry voice and song
 Upon the hills, the valley, and the plain,
 And in Apollo's bosom have I lain;
 Wherefore I, too, unto that band belong,
 Whose momentary music echoes long,
 And like a brook doth to its stones complain;
 I am acquainted with a lover's pain,
 And circumstance, and injury, and wrong.

Lo, the felicity I witness of!
 Dante and Petrarch all unenvied go
 From star to star, upward, all heavens above,
 The grave forgot, forgot the eternal woe;
 Though glorified, their love was human love,
 One unto one: a greater love I know.

VI

How many human loves swarm to my arms,
 Although I am unworthy! yet, in truth,
 I was a lover from my earliest youth,
 And love, even the unworthiest, hath dear charms;
 And oft I feel within me vague alarms,
 Thick-thronging fears, and inward-turning ruth,
 Lest my affections be not things of sooth,
 But phantom-fancies that oft end in harms.

Yet, though I seem unto the outward sense
 The veriest chameleon of love,
 That takes its colors from its ambience,
 And on the sweet herb that it pastures of,
 Transformed unto its nature, glows intense,
 These lower loves mirror the love above.

VII

ALTHOUGH I transmigrate from friend to friend,
Yet do I own an undivided soul;
From form to form created things must roll,
And of their transformation is no end;
But in my substance do I never bend;
Still unity my being doth control,
And still I give myself entire and whole
In all my loves, and with my object blend.

I cannot understand this mystery
That so my changeless soul doth multiply;
As many waves as rise upon the sea,
So many motions in me shoreward fly,
Wherever in this world's immensity
I find a heart to break on, and to die.

VIII

ALL earthly loves to me are of the earth;
But not for that are they to me less sweet,
Although I hold within my soul conceit
Of higher things that have a heavenly worth.
In my mortality I take my mirth,
And crown my head with roses, with swift feet
Run in the race-course, and in song compete
With others, and have joys of home and hearth.

For if in exile I should disappear,
And my true friends I never more might see,
Never to love, never to hold them dear,
Save in thought only, happier would they be
Of my light joys though poorer there to hear;
Even so my lady hath no jealousy.

IX

AND though my soul mix with the fatal ways
Of nature passioning unto her end,
And of her element I make my friend,
Till loftier heavens shall amend my days,
My lady mindeth not: so my own gaze
Lower than man's creation doth descend
The round of being, where myriads aye ascend
Through nature to the super-solar blaze.

And if she see the lily overblown
And all its pure gold scattered to the wind,
And many a lover in his wars o'erthrown,
She strives not nature's being to unbind;
Eternally to her still climb her own:
Spirit through nature is but more refined.

I TRULY wonder what they mean by sin,
 The blest, who in the tabernacle pray;
 I have not found it on my spiritual way,
 The soul's contagion, the black spot within,
 Unto annihilating death akin,
 That mines with preternatural decay,
 And eats the substance of the soul away, —
 The soul, in which true being doth begin.

Although I bear all sorrows of the globe
 Through love and pity, and them feel and see,
 And all things search, and in myself most probe,
 I find it not in others nor in me;
 With such pure elements did nature robe
 My substance, and my senses cleanse and free.

XI

YET often have I wandered from the good,
Grieved my own heart, and marred the beautiful
In action, and transgressed love's golden rule,
And on the wrong side of the battle stood;
Nor seldom have I, even as fancy would,
Of others' lives and fortunes made my tool,
And with my reputation played the fool,
And drunk, and diced, and shown my hardihood.

Ah, then my braggart youth was outward-bound,
And the fair morn a chime of winds and waves;
Full swelled my canvas; the unknown, unfound,—
The inexperienced world my spirit craves,
Called me forever, like a trumpet's sound,
And far adventurers in their ocean-graves.

XII

A Y, from the first my soul was outward-bound,
 And in my eyes was set their sailor-gaze
 Haunting the distance; all my nursing Mays
 Broke into blossom to the breakers' sound;
 Scarce-budded, from the sweet paternal ground
 Was I drawn forth to wandering nights and days,
 Early despairs, swift ripenings, quick decays,
 And all that in youth's chrysalis is found.

And, yet a boy, I sailed the seas of thought,
 And o'er the vague of passion darkly went,
 Adventuring all things for the thing I sought,
 The true, the fair, the dear, the excellent;
 And, trying all things, home I nothing brought,
 Till love unto my side grew eloquent.

XIII

Love bathed my soul in the electric flame
That doth with him most intimacy hold;
Love wrapped around me, fiery fold on fold,
The poets' mantles of immortal fame;
Love poesied in my bosom, and went and came,
And of ideal beauty most he told,
Whereby eternal power cast in one mould
Our being and nature's universal frame.

Love opened to me the deep infinite,
Sphere beyond sphere, seas after rolling seas;
Where swam the world, my soul companioned it,
And in its comprehension was my peace;
On the eternal vague did, brooding, sit,
And from creation knew not how to cease.

XIV

UPON the everlasting element
My soul advanced its intellectual ray,
And far before that spiritual day
The world-wide majesty of nature bent,
Rejoicing in the beam that o'er it went
And summoned forth its being from the gray,
Infinite deep, showering new dawns as spray,—
Its sphere my mind, my mind its continent.

But the delighted soul that there surveyed
Its shoreless being and rich sovereignty,
Whereto all things that are, are subject made,
Drew back alarmed before that silent sea:
Of my own solitude was I afraid,
And the infinitude of fate to be.

FULL gently then Love laid me on his breast,
 And kissed me, cheek and hands and lips and brow,
 So sweetly that I do remember now
 The wonder of it, and the unexpressed,
 Infinite honor wherewith his eyes caressed
 Youth in my soul, then ripening to the vow
 That binds us; and he said to me: "Sleep, thou;
 One comes who brings to thee eternal rest."

I know not how in that dread interval
 My lady did herself to me make known,
 So deep a slumber did upon me fall;
 I woke to know her being in my own,
 The nameless mystery whereon I call
 When every hope hath from my bosom flown.

XVI

SHE is not a pale visionary thing;
 She cometh not to me in dream or trance,
 Nor ever with phantasmal feature haunts
 The passages where thought goes wandering
 Its shadow-world; night's sky-embracing wing,
 That in the sleepy vault all things enchants,
 Captures not there her form and countenance;
 Fancies of her to me no fevers bring.

But when my conscious spirit doth purest ride
 In its full being and sentiency of life,
 When reason standeth at her height of pride,
 And my quick mind, with germination rife,
 Creates, then most in love do I abide,
 And nought but her seems real in that love-strife.

XVII

I UNDERSTAND the roseate mystery
Of maiden-bridals in the Bridegroom's arms,
That on celestial sighs spread forth their charms,
And in devotion yield virginity;
The amorous nun, richer in chastity,
The more love round her with his motions swarms,
Dissolves, as if the rose her bosom warms
Only the spirit of the rose should be.

She gives herself unto her spiritual lord
In ecstasy that doth all flesh consume;
Her soul, incorporate in the Heavenly Word,
Already leaves her body in the tomb;
So sweetly, holily, have I been stirred,
Not unaccompanied in the vacant room.

XVIII

AND they who tell me of the nightingale
That sings unto the rose, tell nothing new.
Bloom, happy roses, spread out to the view
Your bosoms to the never-ending tale!
Encrimson all the gardens, through the vale
Scatter your fragrance on the melting blue!
Sing, happy nightingales, forever true!
Warble your love ere yet the thick notes fail!

Pour, Persian boy! and with wine fill the cup,
And still the cup refill ere the guest goes!
Time, that fleets fast, soon drinks the last draught up,
The wine, the page, the nightingale, the rose!
Last in the Sun's inn shall the poet sup,
Who, sole, the vine's mysterious gladness knows!

XIX

O SACRED Love, and thou, O Love Profane,
Great branches issuing from the viny stock
Fast-rooted in earth's old primeval rock,
Single your nature is, though seeming twain.
The must of life is all one crimson stain
Of vintage; there all generations flock;
The rosy trampling feet let no saint mock,
The cup divine no reveller disdain!

True love repeals all codes that have defined
Higher and lower in its ministry;
True love hath no diversity of kind,
And undivided must its nature be;
Earthly or heavenly, my soul divined,
Only through passion cometh purity.

OH, could we know with disencumbered eyes
 The spirit's consubstantiality
 That only maketh men truly to be
 Mankind, and to the angels them allies,
 Seeing how love their being magnifies
 And of those pure affections makes them free,
 Whose rosy region is eternity, —
 What heavenly argosies would crowd our skies!

We should encounter, then, on every gale
 Mighty emotions that our breasts now pen;
 Ethereal fleets forever setting sail,
 Visions of youth, we should behold again;
 And shining on the world's horizons hail
 The congregation of the hopes of men.

WELL from the first I knew how long deferred
My rapture, unaccomplished here below;
Yet must I upon all the winds that blow
Speak to all creatures my adoring word,
So burning in my bosom's depth was stirred
The power of loving; loving must I go,
Though crowning of desire I shall not know,
A soul enamored, of the people heard.

All of my lady is this spreading fire,
And mystical the quality thereof,
That, parted farthest, unto her goes nigher,
And seeming most to stoop, most springs above,
And borne in heaven, unquenchable desire,
Lights upon earth a thousand flames of love.

"FEAR not to be alone," my lady said,
 "Nor care thy heart to centre and confine
 On any mortal thing; but be it thine
 Alike on good and evil still to shed,
 Sunlike, thy nature; so the fountain-head
 Of all that is, doth unto each assign
 Some portion of the element divine
 That liveth, and abroad its glory spread.

"Love that toward thee its answering motion takes,
 A thousand-fold shall thy life-current heap,
 Whereof already prescience in thee wakes;
 A river of the world, that flood shall sweep
 With many voices on; full-banked, it makes
 Out, far out, to the unimagined deep."

XXIII

“LOVE purifies his acts,” my lady said,

“As first Apollo in his Castaly

His votaries dipped, and in thy turn dipped thee,
And healed thee of thy wounds of hardihead,

Whom great desires into great perils led

And made thee bonds even of thy liberty;

True service of the god, whate’er it be,

Doth in the action heavenly pardon shed.

“Only great sorrows can him greatly bless

Who shall from great ideals his nature draw;

Who doth no other lord than love confess,

And aye shall own not any other law,

Great raptures shall be his, and great distress,

And innocence whereof the world hath awe.”

XXIV

WHO hath not kissed the rose's tender leaf,
 And sighed to think how easy 't is to show
 To silent things of beauty the heart's woe,
 And soothe with loveliness the spirit's grief?
 How many an Attic stele's fair bas-relief,
 That only now in memory I know,
 Has helped me to renounce and to forego!
 Of beauty's favors to me this is chief.

When nighest to perfection I have trod,
 In art's still dream or where earth's roses burn,
 But most where human souls at Hermes' rod
 Turn marble-pure, life's deepest truth I learn,—
 From the child's kiss, the grave's late-turned sod,—
 Love is most sweet that looks for no return.

I NEVER muse upon my lady's grace,
 Nor dream upon her bounty, what may be
 Largess or guerdon at the last to me,
 Who serve far-off and in a lowly place.
 I was not fashioned of the suitor-race
 Who give their labor and their hearts for fee;
 No recompense of my fidelity
 I meditate,—not even to see her face.

Only always invisible tenderness,
 Hanging about me like a spiritual cloud,
 Holds me obscure, and undivulged doth bless
 My soul, and in this world doth strangely shroud:
 Whereof the meaning I but faintly guess,
 Save that it keeps me private in life's crowd.

XXVI

IN what a glorious substance did they dream
Who first embodied immortality,
And in warm marble gave this world to see
The earthly art that lifts heaven-high its beam!
Of things that only to the spirit seem
They wrought the eternal stuff of memory,
And the invisible divinity
That they so loved, did in their temples gleam.

I have no art to deify the stone,
Nor genius, later born, to limn or paint;
No instrumental music do I own,
Of choiring angel or ecstatic saint;
Best by its frailties here is true love known,
That in the heavenly presence waxes faint.

XXVII

AND they, the Ionians, whose first-born minds
 Ethereal bore the intellectual ray
 Of knowledge through this realm of night and day,
 Where the apparent the true motion blinds,
 And change forever into new change winds
 And melts in the great world's creative play, —
 What power was theirs nature to disarray,
 What sight that in the seen the unseen finds!

Creation hath a double garniture,
 Twice woven of invisibility;
 Beauty and truth shall one another lure,
 And each to other aye resolvèd be;
 So forms divine shall this sad light endure,
 And thought transcend the sphere perpetually.

XXVIII

“AN evil thing is honor,” once of old
The saddest of Italian shepherds sang,
And on his mouth the immortal lyric sprang
That through all ages pours the age of gold:
“Not that the earth untilled her harvests rolled,
The rose no thorn, the serpent had no fang,
The sea no furrow, nowhere ever rang
The battle, but that love was uncontrolled.”

The reminiscence of all lost desire
That love-defrauded hearts dream on for aye,
Hangs in the words, and rises from the lyre,
Whose ecstasy fails not unto this day.
O Song of Gold! O all-consuming fire!
Victorious flame! O lover-hearted lay!

XXIX

I KNOW not what in other men may sleep
Of lower forms, which nature knew to shape
To higher, and from her primal slime escape
To sea, and land, and heaven's aerial deep;
Nor with what stirrings their thick blood may leap
Of ante-natal slaughter, brutish rape;
I own no kinship with the obscene ape;
No beast within my flesh his lair doth keep.

The memory of the rose-tree runs not back
Through the dim transmutations of the rose;
Sphere over sphere, above the solar track,
The round of heaven greatens as it goes;
So am I changed; though the last change I lack,
When over love itself oblivion flows.

X X X

OH, how with brightness hath Love filled my way,
And with his glory hath beset my road!
It seemeth that to him alone I owed
Dawn, and the sweet salvation of the day.
Enlightenment upon my soul held sway,
And all my faculties of man o'erflowed
With inward light, that, unobservèd, showed
The path, more brilliant than noon's burning ray.

I did not know it then,—that gift divine,
The beam wherein my spirit walked secure;
I thought the clarity of nature mine,
Which only in him shines, and doth endure;
The track of light behind me crystalline
With truth eternal, he made bright and pure.

X X X I

FROM what a far antiquity, my soul,
 Thou drawest thy urn of light! what other one
 Of royal seed—yea! children of the sun—
 Doth so divinely feel his lineage roll
 From the full height of man? the immortal scroll
 Of thy engendering doth from Plato run,
 Colonnos singing, Simois, Marathon!
 Into thy birth such secret glory stole.

The kings of thought and lords of chivalry
 Knighted me in great ages long ago;
 From David's throne and lowly Galilee,
 And Siloa's brook, my noble titles flow;
 Under thy banners, Love, devout and free,
 Storing all time, thy child, I come and go.

X X X I I

MUCH in Bithynia I pondered on
The last god-birth of dark antiquity,
Antinoös, whose golden mystery
The sunset was of old religion.
There in the passing of a world he shone,
And left, unmindful of the world to be,
This marble youth to be his memory,
Beautiful, lost in thought, when all was gone.

Olympus had exhaled into a dream,
And nought was left to man save his own heart.
How could he of himself more nobly deem
Than to transmute his being into art?
And how could human beauty brighter beam
Than in its perfect flower to depart?

X X X I I I

W_HY, Love, beneath the fields of asphodel
Where youth lies buried, goest thou wandering,
And like a rainbow droops thy irised wing
Above the dead on whom sweet passion fell?
There thy eternal incarnations dwell;
There bends Narcissus o'er the beauteous spring;
There to the lovely soil doth Hyacinth cling.
Ay me! when young, I breathed the Aegean spell.

Once voyaged I—Europe, Asia on each hand—
To the inaccessible, dim, holy main;
Beautiful Ida wooed me, misty, grand;
Scamander shouted music in my brain;
And in the darkness, in the Trojan land,
I heard my horses champing golden grain.

XXXIV

O ECSTASY of the remembering heart
That makes of all time but one stretchèd day,
And brings us forward on life's glorious way
An hour or two before we shall depart!
And thus the whole world melts to timeless art,
And we in the eternal moment stay;
That is accomplished for which all men pray,
And blunted is the ever-fatal dart.

Among the flowering ruins of old time
I played with beauty's fragments; Death and Hope
Upon the dizzy stone beheld me climb,
And in the acanthus-mantled marble grope;
I only heard the dawn Memnonian chime
'Mid the wild grasses and wild heliotrope.

XXXV

REBUKEFUL reason, what words fall from thee?

“What actor-art is thine to doff and don!

Is God, then, an antique tradition?

In whose name dost thou pray, away from me?”

’Tis true, steeped am I in idolatry,

Poor poet, bodied of religion!

It is the only food I feed upon.

Drunken with God I must forever be.

’Tis true; each vintage yields me fellowship,

That time has crushed from man’s long-suffering race;

But most the name that blessed my childhood’s lip

Bears up my manhood to the throne of grace;

And though my bread in all men’s tears I dip,

I eat it in old Calvary’s weeping-place.

XXXVI

YET am I such that when the morning breaks,
I leave my garden of Gethsemane,
And often will some god companion me
Who from another heaven his lineage takes;
And on the road such sweet discourse he makes
As fills the world anew with deity;
With other eyes all former sights I see,
And in my soul the beautiful awakes.

So move I on, compassed with forms of grace
Who greet me youngest of the heavenly line,
For that strange light that aye shines in my face
From her I love in secret, makes them mine,
And they adopt me into their high race,
Who only through my lady walk divine.

XXXVII

BETWEEN my eyes and her so thin the screen
 Grows with the passage of my mortal years
 That almost to my human sight appears
The holy presence of the life serene.
The skies of Perugino, golden-green,
 Encompass it; and like an angel nears,
 Through cypress lights, she whom my soul reveres
And dim through veils of nature I have seen.

Most like the coming of the evening star,
 When dawns the night with that sweet miracle,
Her apparition is, from me how far!
 But so doth love within my bosom swell,
And in my eyes such wondrous tidings are,
 I kneel, expectant of what heaven shall tell.

XXXVIII

O THOU who clothest thyself in mystic form,—
Color, and gleam, and lonely distances;
Whose seat the majesty of ocean is,
Shot o'er with motions of the skyey storm!
Thou with whose mortal breath the soul doth warm
Her being, soaring to eternal bliss;
Whose revelation unto us is this
Dilated world, starred with its golden swarm!

Thee rather in myself than heaven's vast light
Flooding the daybreak, better I discern;
The glorious morning makes all nature bright,
But in the soul doth riot more, and burn;
A thousand beauties rush upon my sight,
But to the greater light within I turn.

XXXIX

I KNOW not who thou art to whom I pray,
Or that indeed thou art, apart from me;
A dweller in a lone eternity,
Or a participant of my sad way.
I only know that at the fall of day
Fain would I in thy world companion thee;
Upon the mystery of thy breast to be
Unconscious, and within thy love to stay.

I lose thee in the largeness when I think;
And when again I feel, I find thee nigh;
The more my mind goes out to nature's brink,
The more thou art removèd like the sky;
But when concentrated in love I sink,
Thou art my nucleus; there I live and die.

X L

IMMORTAL Love, too high for my possessing, —
Yet, lower than thee, where shall I find repose?
Long in my youth I sang the morning rose,
By earthly things the heavenly pattern guessing!
Long fared I on, beauty and love caressing,
And finding in my heart a place for those
Eternal fugitives; the golden close
Of evening folds me, still their sweetness blessing.

Oh, happy we, the first-born heirs of nature,
For whom the Heavenly Sun delays his light!
He by the sweets of every mortal creature
Tempers eternal beauty to our sight;
And by the glow upon love's earthly feature
Maketh the path of our departure bright.

X L I

ADONIS-LIKE, gored by the rough world's wound,
Bleeding and dead full often have I lain;
A thousand times, I think, I have been slain,
And all my beauty strewn upon the ground;
And I have heard above me then a sound
Of tears, and hid lament, immortal pain,
Of one for whom my worship was not vain,
Though she divinity hath ne'er unbound

To me nor to another; rose-like there
I felt strange touches on my limbs and head,
A shadow moulding o'er me in the air
Full of the dawning lights about the dead,
And kisses, smothered in a woman's hair,
On my cold face and lips in darkness shed.

FAREWELL, my Muse! for, lo, there is no end
Of singing of the winged and soaring choir,
Whose flights mount up, and, circling high and higher,
My heavenly salutations to her send.
I found her upon earth my only friend;
She fed my boyhood with thy holy fire;
She drew my manhood from the world's desire.
Oh, unto my frail state may she yet lend

Her strength, stay my faint heart, and still console
A little longer; with a poor man's bread
Succor my poverty; and pay my toll
To Charon, when to Lethe I am led!
And ever round her shine the aureole
Of my sad verses, after I am dead!

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